

## The Russian Bathhouse: The Old Russian *Pert'* and the Christian *Bania* in Traditional Culture

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The Russian bathhouse is a highly distinctive feature of Russian traditional culture. As I intend to show in this article, in the semantics of this phenomenon, both Christian and non-Christian features are conjoined.

Since time immemorial the bathhouse has played a significant role in popular life in North-Western and Central Russia, the Volga region and Siberia. Its hygienic, prophylactic and therapeutic functions are broadly well known but, over and beyond these functions, the Russian *bania* is directly connected with many other spheres of life. The *bania* was firmly embedded in everyday life, playing an essential part in the most significant life events. Despite this, it was considered a dangerous, unclean, even life-threatening place. That the Russian bathhouse features extensively in every folklore genre indicates the depth of its roots in the culture. All these factors allow us to assume that it occupies a special place in the North Russian world picture and the contradictory aspects of its image deserve explanation and elucidation.

It is, therefore, appropriate to begin with a survey of the form and functions of the bathhouse before looking at the ritual meaning of bathhouse practices. In its most archaic version, the *bania* is a low, one-roomed log building with a flat roof [Efimenko 1877: 38; Condee 1994: 3]. In the corner near the entrance stands a stove constructed out of large round stones (*kamenka*) with smaller ones placed on top [Ivanitskii 1898: 23]. To heat the water, red-hot stones were taken with fire irons and put into a wooden tub [Sokolovs 1915: xii].<sup>(1)</sup> Since the stove had no chimney, smoke was expelled through the door or a small window [Blomkvist 1956: 342]. It did not take long before all the walls and the ceiling would be covered in soot, resulting in this kind of bathhouse being called “black” (*chernaiia*) [Sinozerskii 1899: 432].

Steam is the most important characteristic of the Russian *bania*. It is generated when water is poured on the heated stones of the stove [Adrianova-Peretts 1996: 9]. Usually it is a small quantity of water but in special cases beer, kvass, honey or an extract of medical herbs may be added [Tereshchenko 1848: 159, 172]. When the steam fills the bathhouse evenly, beating with a broom begins [Kostomarov 1860: 98-99]. After bathing comes dousing, either with water from the well, or by jumping in a river or lake, or rolling in the snow [Shkoldin 1863: 37].

The bathhouse was visited for hygienic purposes, that is, conventional bathing, every week and on the eve of festivals [Kostomarov 1960: 99], as well as during occasional and calendar rites and family rituals. It was also the locus for healing, witchcraft, divination and the transfer of a sorcerer's occult knowledge [Ryan 1999: 73; Stepanova 1994: 295]. In certain cases, it could be lived in; for example, a woman after childbirth spent several days (or, in some local traditions, even weeks) there together with her baby [Zelenin 1915: 823]. A family rendered homeless after a fire could find shelter in the bathhouse [Chelishchev 1886: 144]. But it was not considered an appropriate place to live permanently; even spending a night there was deemed undesirable

[Kharuzin 1889: 137]. At the same time, it was often the location of meetings between young country folk: the girls busy spinning, embroidering or knitting and the lads coming to court them [Zelenin 1914: 774].

The *bania* was the only place where Christian symbols could not be brought. Icons were never hung in the bathhouse [Karnaukhova 1928: 84], and it was necessary on entering to remove one's belt and cross, something inadmissible in any other circumstances [Efimenko 1877: 165].(2)

Bathing was surrounded by numerous rules and prohibitions regardless of whether we are referring to a special ceremony or to ordinary washing. Bathing on your own is prohibited [Neklepaev 1903: 43]. In most places where the bathhouse is found it is forbidden to bathe after three groups have steamed themselves already [Loginov 1993: 96], the "fourth" steaming usually being left for the bath spirit, the *bannik* (or *baennik*). Warm water and a broom are left in the bathhouse especially for him [Zavoiko 1917: 38]. In order not to anger the *bannik* it was not permitted to make any noise, speak loudly, chivvy others along, swear, let alone to put a curse on anyone [Efimenko 1878: 165]. A word uttered in the bathhouse was held to possess magical power. As a consequence, the *bania* was considered the appropriate place for witchcraft [Neklepaev 1903: 187; Razumova 1992: 102], for uttering charms against illness [Loginov 1993: 20; 120] and "spoiling," or the transfer of special occult knowledge [Maksimov 1996: 60-61; Mazalova 1994: 26; Ryan 1999: 50].

The times when the bathhouse could be got ready are strictly regulated, with the usual day for ordinary bathing being Saturday [Khudiakov 1864: 43; *ARME*, F.7, no. 338]. The hour is also fixed: after lunch, towards evening but not at night, since midnight is the time for magic practices [Tseitlin 1912: 159]. Otherwise, the *bania* was heated on the eve of holidays, of which the most crucial was Holy Thursday (the Thursday before Easter), that is *Chistyi chetverg* (lit. Clean Thursday) [Magnitsky 1883: 16]. It was customary also to take a bath after Shrovetide on the first day of Lent, known as Clean Monday (*Chistyi ponedel'nik*) [Makarenko 1913: 152]. In some places, people went to the *bania* before St. John's Day (June 24/July 7) [Loginov 1996: 446-47]. The bathhouse was also heated for travelers before departure [Avdeeva 1842: 116] or on their return [Vereshchagin 1849: 222] as well as for guests from afar, and this custom might be enacted at any time of day or night.(3) In Karelia before fishermen and hunters left for the season they also would take a bath [Loginov 1993: 41]. On the night before major holidays, in particular at Christmas, New Year, and Epiphany (known in the Orthodox tradition as Baptism (*Kreshchenie*) (Jan. 6/19)), the bathhouse was used for fortune-telling [Uspensky, Lotman 1996: 346].

Taking a steam bath possessed considerable importance in life cycle rites [Peterson 1994: 201]. The *bania* was heated for a woman after childbirth [Ryan 1999: 176]; even in cases when the actual birth took place in the house or cattle-shed a bath was arranged for the same day [Kofyrin 1900: 56]. Brides went to the bath before their wedding day [Arsen'ev 1879: 64], which, since weddings were usually celebrated on Sundays, would thus be on a Saturday [Gippius 1928: 152]. In some areas, it was also customary for the groom to bathe [Tereshchenko 1848: 172], as it was for recruits before they set off for the army [Ul'ianov 1914: 236]. Newly-weds were expected to take a steam bath immediately they awoke after the wedding night [Vertepov 1903: 97]; indeed there is testimony that in some provinces it was usual to heat the *bania* after every sexual contact [Loginov 1993: 123; Zelenin 1991: 281; Peterson 1994: 201]. Furthermore, the participants in a burial

procession visited the bathhouse in order to “wash their grief away,” and it was necessary to go after a funeral repast [Avdeeva 1842: 122]. A bath for the dead was an essential component of rites of commemoration, known since ancient times and mentioned in early Christian sermons [Vladimirov 1897: 238; Gal’kovskii 1916: 202, 203].

Heating the bathhouse on Sundays and holy days was banned [Ivanitskii 1898: 70; Condee 1994: 5], and those who did would be punished by the bath spirit: “The *baennik* has iron arms. He is very spiteful, and he tortures and torments to death those who come for a bath without a blessing or around midnight, especially on holy days and at Yuletide” [Zelenin 1914: 263].

According to popular belief, the water prepared for a bath possessed extraordinary qualities. It was only to be used for bathing, and not for drinking or washing clothes [Efimenko 1877: 165], while its qualities could be intensified (especially in rites of healing) by uttering a special incantation [Ivanovich 1903: 149]. In life-cycle rites (birth and wedding) the origin of the water played a significant role. It had to be taken from several springs [Zorin 1981: 93], from further up or down stream [Loginov 1993: 52; Ivanovich 1903: 71], and it might be diluted with holy water, gold, salt, grain or alcohol. Sometimes in healing rituals it was *molchanaia voda* (that is, water brought in silence) that was used [Loginov 1993: 51-52]. In special cases great attention was paid to the firewood, which was carefully selected according to its appearance and quality [Loginov 1993: 52; Kolpakova 1962: 260]; wedding laments describe the choice of wood and water for the bride’s bath in some detail [Barsov 1885: 102].

The chief “tool” in the bathhouse was the broom which also had to be made with utmost care. The time and the rules for making brooms were very strict [Leskov 1894: 515]. In some cases they were made from herbs [Loginov 1996: 447; Makarenko 1913: 84], but in other cases herbs/flowers were just added to birch twigs gathered on St. John’s Day [Kolossova 2000: 295; Annenkov 1876: 289; Zelenin 1914: 36]. The broom also played an important role in the bride’s bath, when the girls took it from the groom, decorated with flowers and ribbons, and then used it for predicting the course of the marriage [Lipinskaia, Saf’ianova 1978: 191]. Magic powers were ascribed to the broom with which a new-born baby was given his/her first steam bath; it was later used in charms to cure childhood illnesses [Loginov 1993: 54] while the butt quite often served as a talisman [Avdeeva 1842: 148].

Preparing the bath was entrusted to a special person. For ordinary bathing this would be a woman, who would then invite the other members of the household, but it was the girls who were bridesmaids who were responsible for the bride’s bath [Bernshtam 1983: 124; Ryan 1999: 75]. In places where the groom went to the bathhouse, it was the *druzhka* (the best man) who did it [Kireevskii 1911: 48-49], while the matchmaker was in charge of the bath for the newly-weds [Guliaev 1852: 23]. When the bath was heated for medical or magic purposes it was the magic healer or sorcerer who did it. These were generally, but not exclusively, the same people who were in charge of the actual steaming (i.e. beating with a broom). Thus, though a magic healer gave a sick person his or her steam bath [Demich 1889: 11; 25], the bride might be given hers by a sorcerer or the matchmaker instead of her girlfriends [Balashov, Marchenko, Kalmykova 1985: 104; Guliaev 1852: 23] the

groom by relatives as well as the *druzhka* [Tereshchenko 1848: 111; 159; 171-172], and the midwife assisted a woman after childbirth.(4) Participants in the usual Saturday visit to the bathhouse steamed each other in turn.

The bathhouse is always situated at some distance from the living quarters [Kostomarov 1860: 48]. In reality the distance might not be that great, but it is always interpreted as considerable. The *bania* is considered to be outside the Christian world: “however near the *bania* is to the house, it is believed to be seven versts away, and so you are not supposed to go there saying a prayer... If you go to the bathhouse alone, devils may tear you apart. That is why we never steam ourselves on our own” [Zavoiko 1917: 35 – 36]. Hence, for conventional Saturday washing, peasants would go to the bathhouse in *pary*, *partii* or *vatagi* – small groups of two or more people. The bride was brought to the bath by her girlfriends or a sorcerer [Kozyrev 1912: 80; Ryan 1999: 75], the groom – by the *druzhka* or some of relatives, while newly-weds were accompanied by the *druzhka*, matchmakers and guests. It was the midwife (*povitukha*) who accompanied the new mother.

At the entrance, you were supposed to utter a special formula: “*Bannyi khoziain, pusti menia v baniu poparit'sia!*” (Master of the bathhouse, let me in to steam myself) [Adon'eva, Ovchinnikova 1993: 30]. It was also crucial to ask the bath spirit for permission when it was necessary to spend a night in the bathhouse [Zavoiko 1917: 39]. After bathing you should thank either the *bania* or the *bannik* for the steam: “*Spasibo na paru, na ban'ke, khoziain, khoziaiushka*” (Kind host, kind hostess, thank you for the steam bath) [Adon'eva, Ovchinnikova 1993: 31].

Attention to clothing formed an important part of bathing ritual, whether it was what was worn on arrival or put on afterwards; usually people came to the bathhouse in the clothes they had worn all week. In life-cycle rites this is very noticeable; in some places after childbirth a woman had to go to the *bania* wearing torn clothing, carrying a big crutch or shovel (*skovorodnik*, a tool for putting pans into the oven) [Magnitskii 1883: 19].(5) There are parallels here with the bride's bath: the bride removed all her finery (earrings, beads, etc.) and put on a very poor, plain dress [Arsen'ev 1879/64: 2].(6) After bathing, clean clothes had to be put on,(7) and a special charm against “spoiling” uttered [Anikin 1998: 314]. Often the ritual demanded not just clean but new clothes [Balashov et al. 1985: 104]. Certainly newly-weds put on new garments, the clothes for the bridegroom having been made by the bride [Gippius 1928: 158].

Charms and magical manipulations appropriate to the situation were uttered during bathing. When washing a baby the mother or midwife would repeat: “*voda by knizu, a sam by kverkhu*” (water go down, baby go up) [Dal' 1994: 75]; “*s gogolia voda, s rebenkom khudoba*” (like water off the golden-eye duck, so leanness off the baby) [Anikin 1998: 43]. Texts uttered during the washing of the bride or newly-weds also bore an imperative character [Kargin 2001: 300].

The bath-time steaming was believed to have a transforming effect imparting a new quality to life. After a bathhouse visit one feels revitalised even after the usual Saturday bath, as the proverb has it: “*posle parnoi budto vnov' na svet rodilsia*” (After a steam bath you feel born again) [Zimin, Spirin 1996: 176], or “*Bania - vtoriaia mat' nasha*” (the *bania* is our second mother) [Snegirev 1996: no. 503]. At the same time, a proverb compares steaming to the greatest pleasures in life, commensurate with sexual delight: “*Kabak da tabak, bania da baba – odna zabava*” (the inn and tobacco, the *bania* and a woman – that's all pleasure” [Dal' 1996: 255].(8)

In a folk riddle, steaming with the broom is likened to coitus, with the broom playing the male role: “*Вспомни, Ваня, дорогой, как меня наяривал: и в стоячку, и в лежачку промеж ног давал горячку*” (Remember, Vania my dear, how I got steamed: both standing and lying I got a hot place between my legs) [Minenok 1995: no. 31]; or “*Пришел ко мне мелкота, хватъ меня за бока; я ему дала, кверху ноги задрала. Любо-хорошо – еще хочется*” (a small thing came to me, grabbed me under the arms; I gave in to him, raised my legs in the air. Mm, really nice, I want more) [Sadovnikov 1876: no. 1063].<sup>(9)</sup> It is notable that the riddle also uses the reverse imagery, presenting the sexual act in “bathing” terms: “*Bania kozhana, dveri sileniy, odin paritsia, dvoe nabivaiutsia*” (A leather/skin bath, a hair door, one is steaming, two impose themselves) [Podiukov 1995: 372].

The bathhouse was believed the place where a newborn baby’s fate could be determined [Sadovnikov 1884: 295-97]. After being bathed, the baby acquired the status of a human being; his limbs were “corrected,” and he acquired the appearance of a “real” human being; as she smoothed his head, the midwife would say: “*raspravlen, teper’ uzhe urodtsem ne budesh*” (straightened, you won’t be a freak now) [Krivoschapkin 1865: 2]. Special manipulation “created” his sex, and then his future talents and skills were determined. For example, a boy’s umbilical cord should be cut on an axe, the girl’s on a spindle, so that they became skillful workers [Baiburin 1993: 42-44]. After her bath the bride ceased to be seen as a girl and joined the category of married women [Zyrianov 1970: 65]. After childbirth women, who were considered unclean for seven weeks, were expected to visit the bathhouse a set number of times (3-9) before being allowed to return to their usual duties, that is, “working, sleeping with her husband, eating meat, going visiting, dining with the family, milking the cow, kneading dough, touching the icons or visiting the church and cemetery” [Loginov 1993: 48]. In this way, they restored their status. It may be assumed that taking a bath after a funeral helped people to return to the world of the living [Avdeeva 1842: 122]. A guest from somewhere far away, from alien space, would wash away his alien character while bathing and could then be invited to dinner with the household [Vereshchagin 1849: 222]. Charms and rituals involving newly-weds were designed to create a healthy, safe, rich future [Kireevskii 1911: 48 – 49];<sup>(10)</sup> and charms were also the most significant component of healing rituals [Loginov 1993: 24, 37, 45, 87, 89].

The return from the bathhouse is usually marked by, for example, the ceremony of meeting the bride [Kolpakova 1937: 65], in which large numbers of people participate, or by the greeting “*S legkim parom*” (with a light steaming), usually said when family members come back into the house. Even today the end of bathing must be marked with food and drink. The name of the ritual bread, *bannik*, indicates the connection between bath and meal. In the North of Russia this bread was baked for different occasions, such as weddings, births or the start of work in the fields [DRFD 1966: 56]. Female neighbors brought pies and other food for the new mother [Babarykin 1853: 23], and after the bride’s bath a girls’ party took place in which the bride entertained her friends for the last time before the wedding [Tereshchenko 1848: 171-72]. When the groom visited the bathhouse, he too invited his friends to refreshments (known as the *mal’chishnik* [Lipinskaia, Saf’ianova 1978: 192]. After the newly-weds had bathed, the “*kniashoi stol*” (prince’s feast) was set out for them [Kireevskii 1911: 44], while the funeral bath was followed by a special dinner for the dead [Sobolevskii 1891: 229].<sup>(11)</sup>

In many cases gift giving took place after bathing. After childbirth the mother prepared gifts for the visiting neighbors, and for the midwife linen, flax or money [Zelenin 1914: 744; 1915: 820; 1916: 1146]. The bride received presents from her parents after bathing and gave her girlfriends ribbons and earrings [Balashov, Marchenko, Kalmykova 1985: 105]. Before the wedding during his ritual bath, the groom gave a present to the best man who was in charge of the steaming [Tereshchenko 1848: 172]. Very often gifts of clothes and linen were given by the bride to the groom's family after the newly-weds' bath [Zelenin 1915: 6].(12)

Analysis of the ethnographic data leads to the conclusion that taking a steam bath is always an independent rite in itself, even when ordinary washing is involved. First of all, bathing (both ritual and conventional) is clearly localized in space and time. The bathhouse occupies a liminal site, on the edge of the village or yard, between one's "own" and "alien" space; time too is liminal - a moment of cardinal change in the life of the community (Saturday evening) or the individual (life-cycle or occasional rites). Apart from this, bath ritual has a clearly marked beginning and end with corresponding formulas and prescribed ways of "entering" and exiting from the situation of washing. In any case, there exists a fixed order in bathing ritual - events develop according the same structure: the person responsible for the arrangement of the bath performs the same actions, whether he/she utters any texts or not.

One of the characteristic features of taking a steam bath is the presence of a pair of participants, one active (the subject) and the other passive (the object), who accepts the actions of the former. Events develop according to the structure of rites of passage: separation from the group, a move to a marginal space, symbolic death and rebirth in a new state (occurring through the medium of a certain person (the subject) who directs the process of metamorphosis), return, and reincorporation into the community [Van Gennep 1977]. As a result, the object acquires a new status. If we take into account the time and location of the *bania* this does not seem strange. The bathing process is always fixed to a moment when the ties and bounds of cosmos are destroyed and the future uncertain. This damaged world threatened by total collapse is always being reconstituted in one and the same way: the elements (that is, fire, water, stone, wood and a special, thick tangible kind of air – steam) are brought together in a sacred place, and the new reality, status or knowledge is being created by a special procedure which mimics coition. The new reality may just maintain the normal flow of life for the week to come or define life over the many years of a marriage. In this new reality the individual is healthy and successful, and world is right. The verbal and action codes of the ritual coincide or enrich each other, that is to say, this new reality is being created by both word and deed. In any situation the bathhouse remains a place where both manipulation and word possess great magical force. The significance of expressing good wishes and uttering incantations is evident, just as the danger of accidental damnation is very great. That is why one must be extra-cautious in the *bania* to guard one's behavior and especially words.

It is important to emphasize that metamorphosis is enacted while the person concerned is naked. "Ablution and its attendant nudity, as well as the absence of any signs that indicate a connection with sphere of "culture" all apparently symbolized the "natural," "initial" state of man [Baiburin 1993: 43]. His previous state is being washed from his naked body. This washing is the last action that finally neutralizes the object. Naked, the person is deprived of all human characteristics, but washed, he becomes the raw material for the creation of a

new man with new qualities. The manipulations of a specialist who conducts this change confirm the new status, and the subsequent dressing in new, clean, special, or at least different garments lends social meaning to this change. Even the clean clothes put on after ordinary washing indicates renewal. The meal and the exchange of gifts which also very often accompanies the end of the bath is a further indication of the ritual meaning of washing in the bathhouse.

Thus, the bath can be viewed as a universal place of creation. Every week (and at every critical moment in the life of the individual or community) the normal currents of life were being maintained here, and the “right” future fashioned. In situations of danger, an earlier, safe state of existence was being regained. All these were achieved through the simplest of procedures. It would appear that straightforward washing of the body is in reality a secondary function of the *bania*, although its importance for a healthy daily existence cannot be overestimated. In this sense, the *bania* is a unique phenomenon. It is usual to nominate its hygienic function as the primary function of the bath, but it may be conjectured that the desire for cleanliness did not originally cause its appearance. Analysis of proverbs and riddles about cleanliness and the bathhouse reveals that these themes do not intersect. In fact, some proverbs indicate the ability of bath to wash away, but they do not have in mind physical dirt but rather an individual’s previous condition or status; the bath can wash away grief, illness, “spoiling,” love, the bride’s “freedom” and so on.

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Having scrutinized the roles, functions and meaning of the *bania* using ethnographic sources, in which its symbolic and actual connections with rites of passage and the restoration of individual and community harmony have been revealed, I shall now turn to a consideration of Christian and non-Christian elements in this tradition. These can be seen to correspond to the two words that exist in early Russian sources, *bania* and *pert*, of which, as Vahros [1963, 1966] has cogently argued, the latter relates to the original bathhouse system of the area..(13) The ability of the *pert* to “wash away” was taken by the Orthodox Church and adapted for a new symbolic function. Purification by means of ablution plays an important role in both Jewish and Greek traditions. Considering the deep roots of the bathhouse in early Russian culture, we may assume that the Church was able to reinterpret it as an Orthodox rite new to the East Slavs. Accordingly, it would appear that the Christian concept of christening, in which the individual washes away original sin and appears before God innocent as a child, was attached to the old Russian idea of washing away the previous state of existence and acquiring a new one.(14)

The purification of the soul by prayer is likened to the purification of the body through bathing, and as such it is one of the most significant Christian symbols. Baptism itself is in the Slavonic bible actually termed “*bania*,”(15) the purifying significance of God’s word is compared with the power of love: “As Christ loved the Church, and gave Himself for it, that he might sanctify it and cleanse it with the washing of water [*baneiu vodnoi*] by the Word” [Ephes., 5; 25-26]. But it is necessary to point out that the Slavonic text refers to a “water bath,” not a “steam bath.” The steam bath is mentioned in the chronicle as well as in charms and laments widely believed to be ancient in origin, whereas bathing in water is mentioned by Christian sources because Greek baths did not use steam.

It would appear that Orthodox tradition strictly divided the Old Russian, pre-Christian *pert'* (and ablution, "*movenie*," connected with it) from the *bania* that came to Russia from Byzantium together with Orthodoxy. There seems little doubt that *pert'* was associated with pagan rites. The Church both attached a new symbolism to the former ritual and replaced the old Russian word *pert'* with a new, loan word. This substitution happened very quickly: *pert'* had disappeared from the language (in the records at least) within 200 years of the conversion of Rus'. In a twelfth-century document, the homily of Luka-Ioann, Archbishop of Novgorod, the bathing habits of the Novgorodians are regarded as a pagan anti-Christian practice, incompatible with divine service. Clerics who go to church after bathing are criticized: "having washed, they still celebrate the mass; you brethren, are not to do this" [Vladimirov 1897: 145]. Here this rule is addressed to clerics but evidently was later extended to lay folk. In the sixteenth-century the Church banned from communion anyone who was fasting but who had accidentally let water get into his/her mouth while bathing [DRL: 105]. The idea that drinking water in the bathhouse was prohibited appears in mid-nineteenth-century ethnographic sources [Efimenko 1877: 165] and still exists today. The Christian tradition by contrast was connected with a different type of bath, used as a baptismal font and erected by churches themselves. In particular, the eleventh-century bishop of Pereiaslavl', Efrem was famous for building both churches and stone bath structures [Golubinskii 1880: 566]. So, *pert'* as an attribute of pagan practice was contrasted to the *bania* as part of a church.

Conceptually, bath and church service are opposites. Thus the sorcerer could be recognized because on Sundays (or Church festivals) when all good Christians were in church, sorcerers retreated to the bathhouse. As can be seen from the plot of a folk historical song about the False Dmitrii, the pretender was unmasked when he went to the bathhouse during a church service on a festival [Kireevskii 1911: 67-72; 75-76; Kirsha Danilov 1958: 79-81; Gil'ferding 1948: no. 236; Ryan 1999: 50]. The song accuses him of sorcery, that is, adherence to a pagan cult. The same contrast is evident in the homily mentioned above – bathing and then conducting mass is not permitted.

In the light of the discussion above, it should be fruitful to reexamine the very first mention of the bathhouse in Russian literature, the legend of St. Andrew's visit to Rus'. The legend appears in the opening section of the primary chronicle, the *Tale of Bygone Years* (*Povest' vremennykh let*) depicting the pre-history of the Kievan state. The procedure of steaming in baths allegedly observed by the apostle in the area where Novgorod was later founded is described in remarkable detail, something generally untypical of the laconic style and subject matter which eschews everyday life. Andrew tells his story in Rome where he has come after visiting the Russian lands. The apostle says nothing about land of the Poliane (one of the East Slavic tribes) where he raised a cross and prophesied God's mercy and glory to the future city of Kiev. Instead, the apostle was "surprised" by the custom of steaming in baths, and his amazement seemed to the chronicler worthy of mention in the world centre of Christianity. In the scholarly writing devoted to an analysis of the legend, the episode has traditionally been interpreted as the Kievans ridiculing the strange habits of the Novgorodian Slavs. But this interpretation is seriously open to question for two reasons. Firstly, the legend is inserted in the solemn and significant part of the chronicle about the origins of the Russian state. It seems hardly credible that everyday jokes about the customs of another Slav tribe (which subsequently became part of Kievan Rus') would be



appropriate in this part of the chronicle. Secondly, the Kievans had been acquainted with the institution of the bathhouse since at least 882 when Prince Oleg moved to Kiev with his retinue.<sup>(16)</sup> For these reasons I would suggest that there was another reason for including the Legend in the chronicle.

The passage about the Novgorodian Slavs and their baths precedes a description of the pagan wedding and funeral customs of the other Slav tribes, the Krivichi, Viaticchi and Drevliane. In contrast to the other Slav tribes the Poliane are presented as a relatively civilized, if pagan, people, and this line is in keeping with the general orientation of the chronicle which was compiled in Kiev, the area occupied by the Poliane. The chronicler's aim was to show that the Poliane were more ready to accept Christianity than other Slav tribes. If we look at the legend from this point of view, the story about Novgorodian Slav bathing habits acquires a different meaning. The Kievan chronicler's irony is aimed not at a bizarre custom but at the pagan practice of ablution bound up with the Novgorod bathhouse. By contrast, baths in Kiev possessed only a hygienic function (we cannot assert with any certainty that Prince Oleg's warriors, mainly Scandinavian Varangians, who while adopting the custom of the steam bath in Novgorod, had also taken on the ritual practices of the Slavs; in any case, as the legend makes clear, baths in Kiev only had a hygienic function.<sup>(17)</sup> In the legend the Novgorod Slav custom of steam baths is ranked with the "savage" customs of other Slavs, and the Poliane whose habits were, according to the legend, "mild and peaceful," thereby look more deserving of God's mercy and their future glory.<sup>(18)</sup>

Thus, the supposition about two semantic complexes in the concept of bathing is confirmed by the totality of the data about the bathhouse in its historical perspective. Given that every ritual can be regarded in the words of Levinton as an "utterance" about something [1995: 261], it seems important to try to ascertain to what bath ritual is referring (at any rate, in its original form). Lexical data emerge as the most valuable in this process.

In different Indo-European languages the root *\*per-* has a series of specific meanings. For instance, the names of the thunder god can be traced back to it (East Slav *Perun*, Latvian *Perkons*, Lithuanian *Perkunas*), as well as numerous verbs with the meaning "to beat," "whip," "lash," "beat with a broom," as well as "to argue," "fight," "struggle" or "oppose." The word for "sweat," "perspire" – *pret'*, *vzopret'* is also connected with this root [Vasil'kov 1999: 357-58; Vasmer 1996/3: 355, 662]. It seems truly remarkable that one of the meanings of the root *\*per-*, "beat with a broom," "sweat out with broom in the bath" along with the name of the bathhouse (Old Russian *pert'*, Latvian *pertis*, Lithuanian *pirtis*) is connected to those Slav and Baltic peoples (Latvians, Lithuanians and North Russians) in whose culture the bathhouse plays an important role.<sup>(19)</sup>

Thus, in the word *pert'* we find a condensed plot about a battle, struggle or quarrel during which one of the participants "beats," "whips," "lashes" the other (maybe with a broom) and this causes sweating. If we take into consideration the sexual connotations of the verb "to beat," as well as the life-giving activity of sweat,<sup>(20)</sup> we can find confirmation of the idea of the *bania* as a symbolic "cosmic marriage" (or "cosmic duel") which emerges clearly from the analysis of proverbs and riddles. It then becomes clear that the Old Russian *pert'* has close connections with *Perun*, the pagan Slav god of thunderstorms – something that looks extremely interesting. According to the lexical data, *pert'* is thus the place for beating, and *perun* the one who does the

beating and it depends on the context whether the beating is literal (with twigs, arrows, lightning, etc) or symbolic coition (that is, creation, transformation). But we do not have the data that would allow us to agree with Boris Uspenskii that in a more or less visible past the bathhouse was a “temple of Volos,” the pagan God of fertility.(21)

Furthermore, although there are some indications that the activities involved in steaming are “perunian” in essence, there are inadequate grounds to suggest that the bathhouse was once directly connected to the cult of Perun. The available folklore materials of all genres attribute the changes that take place in the bathhouse to the actual process of steaming. Neither a god nor his representatives are involved.(22) As far as we can judge from early Russian Christian sources, during the period before the adoption of Christianity, the pagan religious function of the bathhouse seems not to have been really important. The Church did not oppose the bathhouse as such, merely some of the rites and customs, mainly those connected with funerals. With its hostility, the bathhouse acquired the reputation of an unclean place; it was physically removed from consecrated space, its name replaced and prohibitions in connection with church services introduced. All these factors indicate that the generally “pagan” nature of the bathhouse was quite clear to the Church.

Thanks to the influence of the Church, it was the purifying function of the *bania* that emerged supreme, while bathing procedures acquired a distinct Christian meaning. All the traditional rites which incorporated a visit to the bathhouse were reinterpreted as purificatory. This concerned the post-natal bath, the newly-weds bath (as well as the post-coital), bathing for guests and, in general, all bathing before or after an important occasion. This “official” meaning of the bathhouse, together with its cleansing hygienic qualities, have always been so self-evident that it is no wonder that the ancient semantics of transformation, which are not so clear in the ethnographic sources, have lain undetected for so long.

Thus, the Russian *bania* emerges as a phenomenon with very complicated, multi-layered semantics. On the surface, we see a thousand-year-old hygienic custom, an ideal way of maintaining health or regaining strength, as well as a source of fun and pleasure, and which plays a huge role in the everyday life of the people. Thanks to these factors the bathhouse has maintained its attractiveness to this day. Beneath this important surface layer, we can discern the deep Christian concept of washing away sins, a purification essential before taking the sacraments, in its effect to be compared with the word of God. And, finally, deep within lies the concept of the constant renewing of the world, universal transformation, as well as the maintenance of cosmic balance and the regulation of the complete life of the community.

#### NOTES

1 This method was used not only in the bathhouse but also in ritual brewing and for making funeral *kisel'* (special ritual starch-based drink). In Novgorod province beer for patronal festivals was made in wooden tubs (very often in bathhouses) right up to the 1950's.

2 Removing one's cross was also prescribed prior to coition [Ryan 1999: 230]

3 Arranging a bath for visitors was evidently customary even as long ago as 945, judging by the story of Princess Ol'ga's revenge on the Drevliane in the Tale of Bygone Years. Inviting them to Kiev she offers the unsuspecting guests a bath on arrival and then locks them in the heated bathhouse and sets fire to it.

4 It is crucial to emphasize here that the total passivity of the chief participant in certain instances is strictly prescribed, for example, in the bride's bath the girls wash each other and the bride while the latter "touches nothing" [Strakhov 1836: 240].

5 In traditional culture the crutch was believed to be an attribute of representatives of the "other world."

6 It might be the other way round: "She was dressed smartly, in a fur coat, with a beautiful crown, holding embroidered towels in her hands" [Bernshtam 1983: 125]. In both instances special accent is being placed on the clothes.

7 Compare this with the proverb: *na vdove zhenit'sia – vse ravno chto griaznoe bel'e posle bani nadet'* (to marry a widow is the same as to put on dirty clothes after the bath).

8 According to Nadia Peterson, bath and woman are compared (female body and pagan space produce same sensual pleasure [Peterson 1996: 190]. To my mind, however, *bania* in this context means the "process of washing," not the building, and *baba* has to mean "sex," not the "body." I can, however, agree with that idea of smoking, drinking, sex and steaming in the bath can be placed together on equal terms what ranks the bath in the list of main male sins.

9 Nancy Condee points to sayings describing the broom: "within the bath, the broom is the lord" (*V bane – venik gospodin*); "the broom in the bath is senior even to the tsar" (*Venik v bane i tsaria starshe*), suggesting that the broom plays the role of patriarch here [Condee 1994: 11].

10 Certainly, the bathhouse was not the only place where the future was determined. All life-cycle rites aim to ensure a new and happy life.

11 The custom of organizing a bath and a feast for the dead still exists today in Karelia.

12 This custom was also enacted at royal weddings [Kotoshikhin 1859: 10].

13 The chroniclers of the Tale of Bygone Years, who were Kievan monks, evidently avoided using the word *pert'*, probably owing to its strong pagan connotations, preferring the loan word *bania* known to them from Greek/Latin or neutral terms like *movnitsa* or *myl'nia* (place for washing) - *mov'* and *movenie*, as well as *mytva*, indicate a process, not a building, and, more importantly, the process of *washing*, not *steaming*. As a consequence, the term *pert'* does not feature in the chronicle at all, and there are practically no early Russian documents containing this word. Zelenin, for instance, did not know it, and his conjectures about the name centre around *izba*, *istobka*, *bania* [Zelenin 1991: 283]. Nor is the term *pert'* mentioned in the thorough recent collective monograph by a group of Moscow ethnographers on the bath and stove in traditional Russian culture [Lipinskaia et al. 2003], most surprisingly given that Vahros' linguistic study in which he describes the substitution of *pert'* by *bania*, appeared as long ago as 1966 [1966: 54; 321-22; 1963]. One document that does mention *pert'* is a 16th-century homily: "Concerning christening a child... when you are called to the *pert'*, make a prayer over the defiled vessel ... and do not mention his/her name at that point" [DRL 1989: 15; also

Sreznevskii 1989, 2: col. 1772]. The root survives in the word *papert'*, “church-porch,” “outer entrance hall of church,” interestingly a built space connected with a sacred building.

14 The function of the Old Russian bath is not only the washing away of the previous state, but also the washing in of a new quality; still found, for example, when the bride goes to the bath: “*Smyt' dev'iu krasotu i namyt' bab'iu krasotu*” (To wash away her maidenly beauty and wash in her womanly beauty) [Zyrianov 1970: 65]. In the case of church ablution, the *bania* washes away sins, making the individual ready for future rebirth through baptism or the Eucharist.

15 According to Fasmer, the word *bania* comes from Greek or Latin [1986, 2: 121], while Vakhros [1966: 69-70] derives it from the popular Latin *baneum* (*balnea*), a view that concurs with that of Zelenin [1991: 283].

16 The right of the Russian merchants in Constantinople to take baths was mentioned in Oleg's first treaty with the Byzantines in 907: “When guests come they can have provisions for six months, bread, and wine, meat, fish, and fruits. Baths shall be prepared for them in any volume they prefer” [PVL 1996: 17]. The fact that the Kievans insisted on including free washing in the document along with free food demonstrates how well this custom was entrenched.

17 There is only indirect evidence about this: for example, in rural Ukraine bathhouses did not exist in the past and still do not (Ukrainian peasants washed in tubs), but urban public baths have been known for a very long time. It has been assumed that the spread of bathhouses was associated with princes' officials and their retinues: bathhouses seem always to have existed in the main administrative centres. Ritual bath practices were evidently a custom with great princes but they were not usual for ordinary folk in Ukraine and southern Russia.

18 I base this on the view that the Finnish peoples adopted the bathhouse from their neighbors, the Russians or the Balts, together with the name [see Vakhros 1966: 77].

19 The Russian primary chronicle, s.a. 1071, includes a creation legend: “God washed in the bath and after perspiring, wiped himself with straw, and threw it out of heaven to the earth. And Satan quarreled with God as to which of them would create man. And the devil made man, and God put a soul in him. So, when man dies, his body goes to the earth and his soul to God” [PVL 1996: 76; Ryan 1999: 50]. The chronicler put this legend in the mouth of a pagan wizard, thus attributing belief in the vivifying quality of God's sweat to him.

20 According to Nancy Condee, the future churches of Kiev and the baths of the Novgorod Slavs mark two contrasting features of Russian culture: holy faith and pagan practice [Condee 1994: 3, 6]

21 Uspenskii 1982: 154. Nancy Condee thinks that “the very custom of observing ‘bath day’ (*bannyi den'*) on Saturday, the original Sabbath, suggests that the bathhouse occupies the status of a kind of alternate temple: ‘observe Saturday [the Sabbath Day]: go to the bathhouse’ (*Pomni den' subbotnii – idi v baniu!*)... This alternate temple... predates the dominant religion; it is in fact the site of enduring pagan religiosity” [Condee 1994: 5].

22 The one mythological personage of the *bania*, the bath spirit, never engenders metamorphosis; his basic function is to check that visitors have observed the rules and prohibitions concerning behavior in the bathhouse.

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